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Chile

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Chile Has Sixth Highest Occurrence of Child Obesity in the OECD

Report Categories:

Agriculture in the News

Approved By:

Rachel Bickford, Agricultural Attaché

Prepared By:

Maria Jose Herrera M., Marketing Specialist

Report Highlights:

A recent study conducted by the Encuesta Nacional de Salud (National Health Poll) found that 39 percent of Chileans between the ages of 15 and 17 are overweight, and around 300,000 young people suffer from morbid obesity. Dietary professionals blame fast food and sedentary lifestyles for the worrying trend.

General Information:

Hot dogs and deep fried empanadas are integral elements of Chile's gastronomic repertoire. Combine this diet with increasingly sedentary lifestyles, and the source of childhood obesity in Chile soon becomes apparent.

A recent study conducted by the Encuesta Nacional de Salud (National Health Poll) found that 39 percent of Chileans between the ages of 15 and 17 are overweight, and around 300,000 young people suffer from morbid obesity. To break down the statistics even more: 27.1 percent of girls and 28.6 percent of boys between 5 and 17 exceed the healthy height/weight ratio.

These figures place Chile in sixth place in the race for the country with the highest level of childhood obesity in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an international economic organization consisting of 34 member countries. Greece leads the OECD nations with the highest level of child obesity, with the U.S., Italy, Mexico, and New Zealand following close behind.

In response to these results, Chile's education minister, Harald Beyer, emphasized the importance of improving physical education in schools and promoting healthy eating habits within the educational system. "We need to provide a program dedicated to developing a new curriculum in physical education for students," Beyer told La Tercera newspaper. "We will study international trends and look for support from experts in other institutions." Among the schemes proposed by the Ministry of Education are radical changes to school snack foods and the introduction of fitness tests for 29,000 students across the country.

Health Minister Jaime Mañalich confirmed that the OECD is accurate in its diagnosis, commenting, "We have to generate policies between ministries that may influence the development of healthy habits and disease prevention."

The results corroborate past research conducted by the government organization SIMCE in 2010. That research revealed that around 40 percent of Chilean students in the eighth grade are partially overweight, while just one in 10 students are in adequate physical condition. The problem stems from an increasingly sedentary lifestyle in Chile's youth population, in addition to an expansion of the fast food industry, according to the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics in Santiago's Universidad del Desarrollo.

"Obesity is generated, first, by a sedentary lifestyle," said Rinat Ratner, director of the department. "In schools the hours spent playing sports are low. Furthermore, children are spending increasing amounts of time watching TV or sitting in front of the computer." "We have lost the ability to choose good foods," Ratner said. "We consume far more than we need, and that imbalance is what makes us gain weight."

The problem of obesity in Chile is by no means restricted to children. Annual fat intake per person has increased by 13 pounds over the past 20 years, and around 60 percent of the Chilean population is said to be overweight to some degree, according to a study by the Universidad del Desarrollo.

